

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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NICK CARTER SAVES A REPUTATION

OR A BUTTON WORTH A FORTUNE



BY THE AUTHOR
OF
NICK CARTER

THE CHILD UTTERED A MOAN AND FELL HEADLONG TO THE FLOOR.

FOUR NEW NUMBERS 1ST OF EVERY MONTH

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Nick Carter Saves a Reputation;

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY AT SALEM.

It was eleven o'clock on that September night when America's greatest detective, Nick Carter, stepped from the through New York Express at Salem.

He had hardly reached the station platform when a tall man ran against him from the side with considerable force.

The tall man muttered an apology and hastened up the platform, disappearing a few moments later in the smoking car.

Nick followed him with his eyes as long as he was in sight, yet he hadn't seen the man's features because, although the night was moderately warm, the fellow's slouch hat was pulled down over his face and the collar of his coat was turned up till it almost met the brim of the hat.

It was this unusual arrangement of the tall man's attire which attracted the detective's attention.

"Two to one that fellow is concerned in the affair which I am expected to investigate here," thought Nick, as he watched the train pull out.

Then he approached the owner and driver of a depot carriage and asked to be taken to the residence of Major Keys.

He was driven through the town and up a hill just beyond to a large house standing well back from the road and surrounded by spacious private grounds.

Late as it was, a servant took his card, and presently he was led up stairs to the second floor and ushered into a room in the rear of the house.

As the door closed behind him, he was confronted by a man who arose from an easy chair near one of the windows.

"You are Major Keys, I presume," said Nick, without waiting for his host to speak first.

"Yes, and you are Nick Carter?"

"I am Nick Carter, and am here in response to the telegram I received from you to-night, just in time to catch the last train."

"You do not know why I sent for you?" asked Keys, after Nick was comfortably ensconced in a chair.

"Certainly not," was Nick's prompt answer. "I know nothing save what your telegram told me—that you wanted me here immediately on a piece of work which demanded secrecy and prompt action."

"That is true."

"What is the nature of the business, major?"

"To discover, if possible, what has become of my younger daughter, who has been missing since some time last night."

"Where was she last seen?"

"In her room on the third floor of this house, directly over where we are now sitting."

"What time was that?"

"About eleven o'clock. She had gone to bed with a headache."

"Who saw her last?"

"Her sister."

"Saw her in bed?"

"Yes. Belle looked in on Kate to ask whether she could do anything for her."

"Belle is the elder sister?"

"Yes."

"Now, what is there remarkable about the disappearance, major?"

"Several things. In the first place, she was taken from the house through the window of her bedroom."

"That's one circumstance. What else?"

"The house was robbed at the same time."

"Of what?"

"Of a valuable set of diamonds."

"How valuable?"

"They cost me one hundred thousand dollars a week ago."

"So recently purchased?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose did you buy them?"

Major Keys hesitated in his reply and moved uneasily in his chair.

"Is it necessary for me to reply to that question?"

"That depends. If you expect me to help you in this affair, you must conceal nothing from me which I think may be of use in helping me to make things plain."

Major Keys remained silent for several seconds. Then he said:

"The diamonds were intended as a wedding present."

"From you?"

"Yes."

"To whom?"

"To my—to the lady I was to marry."

"You was to marry?" Nick repeated, emphasizing the "was."

"I used that expression because after what has very recently happened the wedding will have to be—postponed at least."

"Has the disappearance of your daughter anything to do with the necessity for postponing your marriage?"

"I fear it has everything to do with it. Or rather, the causes which make a postponement of my intended marriage necessary may have everything to do with Kate's disappearance."

"That is different," commented Nick. "Now it rests with you to say, major, whether I shall go ahead in this case or not."

"How so?"

"Why, if I am, I must know all about the minutest things which may, as you express it, have anything to do with the disappearance."

These words were followed by at least two minutes of utter silence.

Nick knew that his host was weighing some important matters in his mind, and gave him full opportunity to do his thinking uninterrupted by any remark.

When Major Keys did speak, it was to say:

"In that case, I will tell you some things that not even members of my own family know. Mr. Carter, until two nights ago I believed I was entirely free to marry again."

"You have learned differently since then?"

"Perhaps I should say that in law I believe myself still free, but since night before last complications have arisen which put my contemplated marriage, to say the least, outside the pale of wisdom."

"Pray explain."

"On that night I learned that one whom I thought had died fourteen years ago still lives."

"How did you learn it?"

"From her own lips."

"Who is she?"

Major Keys looked anxiously around through the subdued half-light of the room and then replied, in a tone only loud enough for Nick to hear:

"She is the mother of the missing girl."

"Your wife?"

"One whom I once believed to be my wife, and who now comes forward to destroy my happiness."

CHAPTER II.

KATE'S MYSTERIOUS RETURN.

Major Keys again dropped into silence. Nick had made up his mind that in order to get full information from the former he would be compelled to ask many questions.

Therefore he did not let his host remain long in his "shell."

"A woman whom you once believed was your wife, did you say, major?"

"Yes." Then, to Nick's surprise, Keys leaned forward in his chair, and in a low, rapid tone of voice, began to relate the story over which he had so long hesitated.

"Listen. I will tell you as briefly as I can

those things in my life which I think you should know.

"I have been married twice. My first wife I met in England. She died in the fifth year of our marriage, leaving me a little girl—the daughter whom I called Belle.

"I left the child with her grandfather and spent the next two years traveling in many different countries. Then I came to New Orleans.

"There I met a young widow by the name of Smith—Ellen Gascon Smith. She was a most beautiful and fascinating woman. She had one child—a lovely little girl one year old.

"The woman fascinated me. Before I scarcely knew what I was doing, I married her. To make a long story short, I found her a different woman from what she appeared before she became my wife.

"As my love for her cooled and I began to regret the act that gave her the right to call me husband, I found I had learned to very dearly love her baby girl.

"The little one wound herself around my heart in a way that completely held me her prisoner.

"Had it not been for the child, I would have abandoned the woman.

"But I endured her for the little girl's sake.

"One night we quarreled. I taunted the woman with the fact that I no longer loved her, and threatened to leave her and never return. She was insanely in love with me, however.

"Before I knew what she was about, she fulfilled a threat to kill herself rather than become my deserted wife.

"She snatched a knife, which belonged to me, and plunged it into her breast.

"I believed her dead.

"I knew the evidence would point to me as her murderer.

"My only safety was in flight.

"But I could not bear to go away and

leave that little sleeping girl to the care of strangers.

"So, picking the child up in my arms, I fled.

"We boarded a sailing vessel that night, and before sun up were on our way to sea.

"When I got to Europe I secured files of New Orleans papers, from whose pages I gladly read that the woman had not died of her wound. She was taken to a hospital and confessed that the injury was self-inflicted.

"Some months later I read in another New Orleans paper that she had finally died of the wound.

"Some years later I returned to the United States with my two daughters, Belle and Kate, the child of my heart, and placed both in school.

"I came to this quiet place, purchased this home with part of the money I inherited from my uncle's estate, and settled down to a secluded life, as I hoped it would be.

"Just as I had my two children with me again and was happy in the anticipation of making a lady the wife of my mature years—a most estimable lady, whom by years of acquaintance I have learned to highly esteem—that woman crosses my life again."

Major Keys sank back into the depths of his chair once more with a groan that seemed to be wrung from the bottom of his heart.

"You say this woman you believed to be dead appeared before you night before last?" inquired Nick, after a short period of thought.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In this house—in the reception-room, down stairs."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"What did she want?"

"To compel me to take her back—install her here as my acknowledged wife."

"To compel you?"

The major's face became very pale, and he trembled under a powerful emotion.

"She threatened me," he said, hoarsely; "threatened me with that which drove the blood all out of my heart."

"What was it?"

"To claim her child."

"The missing girl?"

"Yes. Somehow she must have learned of my extreme love for Kate. Mr. Carter, my very life is wrapped up in the girl. I love her more than I do Belle, the child of my own flesh and blood."

"And she?"

"Kate? Why, she returns my love twofold. We have been almost inseparable ever since her return from school last May. I have reared her as my own; surrounded her with every luxury; taught her to love wealth, society, and station. It would kill her to know the truth."

"Who was present when you had that interview with the woman—Ellen Smith?"

"Nobody else."

"Where were your daughters?"

"Belle was in New York and Kate was spending the evening with a friend in the town."

"What is that friend's name?"

"I don't know; I never asked."

"How long after Ellen Smith went away was it before Kate came home?"

"I should say it was an hour—maybe longer—I really do not know."

"Was she out alone?"

"Yes. She is a fearless girl, and nothing of a dangerous nature ever occurs here. She is a great pedestrian, and frequently walks down to the stores and to the neighbors' houses after dark, with no company but her Newfoundland dog, Trip."

"Where is Trip now?"

"Out on the grounds somewhere."

"Where was he last night when she disappeared?"

"We found him in the morning penned up in the old well-house near the stables."

"What answer did you give the woman to her demand, night before last?"

"None. I asked for time to consider, and she promised to return for her answer."

"When?"

"To-night."

The major looked at a clock on the mantel, the hands of which pointed to twelve o'clock. Then he added, almost in a whisper:

"At midnight."

"It is that hour now," coolly remarked the detective. "Do you expect her to keep her engagement?"

"I don't know, but I have taken my trusted butler into my confidence. He will quietly admit her if she comes, and I am glad you will be here to meet her in my presence."

The deep tones of the clock striking twelve rang out on the silence of the night. As the last stroke sounded, hurried steps were heard in the hall without. The door flew open without a preliminary knock, and the pale, scared face of the butler appeared.

"She has come," half-whispered, half-gasped Major Keys.

Before another word could be uttered, the butler stepped aside, and the form of a most beautiful young girl, still in semi-short skirts, appeared in the doorway and paused.

"Kate!" almost shrieked Major Keys.

The girl's lips moved, and uttered the single word, "Papa!" faintly. Then her face grew ghastly, and as Keys held out his arms and started toward her, the child—she was scarcely more—uttered a moan and fell headlong to the floor before Nick, the major, or the butler could catch her.

CHAPTER III.

THE STORY OF A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

Major Keys picked the insensible form of the girl from the floor, carried her to a lounge, and laid her tenderly thereon.

The butler at once went in search of restoratives. As soon as he was out of the room, Nick said to Keys:

"When he comes back, send him about his business, with a caution to keep his counsel."

This advice was acted on.

While restoratives were being applied, Nick's professional eye was making a sweeping yet minute inventory of the girl and of her clothing.

Gradually they brought her back to consciousness.

When she opened her eyes Major Keys folded her in his arms and kissed her.

As he did so, the keen-eyed detective noticed that a shudder ran through her slight frame.

Keys seemed to be aware of the shudder, also, for he laid her back gently on the lounge and remarked to Nick, in an undertone:

"The dear child has received some terrible shock."

Nick, who, up to this time, stood in the background, moved around until her eyes could rest on his face without the moving of her head.

The effect was pretty much as he expected. The sight of a stranger diverted her mind for a moment from some horror, which the detective was convinced had prostrated her.

"Who are you?" she finally asked.

Within that minute Nick had changed his plans somewhat.

When he came to Salem it was with the intention of concealing his identity in the character of a relative of Major Keys.

But circumstances caused him to dismiss that plan, and he replied to her question calmly and without hesitation:

"I am Nick Carter, the detective."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came from New York at your father's request."

"Why did papa send for you?"

"To find you."

"Then you can go back now. I have found myself." There was a miserable failure at a smile accompanying the words.

"Ah! You can of course tell us all about your mysterious absence?"

Again that shudder shook her whole body. She turned her eyes slowly toward Major Keys and replied:

"No. I cannot tell you all about it."

"Surely you know where you have been all this time?" questioned Nick.

"No, I do not."

"But you know how you left this house last night?"

"Nor do I know that."

"Then, in heaven's name, Kate, what do you know?" exclaimed the major.

She hesitated a few moments before she replied:

"Very little. I remember going to bed, and falling asleep. I have a vague remembrance of smelling something sweet."

"Chloroform!" ejaculated Keys.

"My next remembrance is of waking up in a strange room, a sort of garret, with only one window, high up above my head. It must have been a prison-room, for the door was locked when I tried it. I could not get out."

"Was that last night?" inquired Keys.

"No. It was daylight when I awoke in that room. I was kept there without food for a whole day. When night came again—this night, I suppose—I fell asleep.

"Suddenly I was awakened, and a man stood beside me."

"A man?" echoed Keys.

"A man whose face I'll never forget," she said, hoarsely. "He wore a red, drooping mustache, and he had a great scar on his face reaching from the lower part of his left ear to the eye."

"Have you ever seen such a man?" asked Nick, turning to Keys.

"Never. You did not recognize him, did you, Kate?"

"I had never seen him before, and never want to see him again."

"Well, I think I saw him take the train at the Salem depot this very night," thought Nick, "and I hope I'll see him again."

"What happened when this man woke you in your prison-room?" said Nick, once more addressing the girl.

"He put me to sleep."

"Put you to sleep? Gave you an anæsthetic?"

"I suppose so. He placed a handkerchief over my face and held it there till I lost consciousness."

"And where were you when you next regained your senses?"

"Lying propped up against the old well-house near the stables."

Nick remembered that it was in the old well-house where Keys told him the dog had been shut up on the night of Kate's disappearance.

"This is inexplicable," exclaimed the major, looking at the detective.

"You haven't the least idea where you were imprisoned?" he asked of Kate, without replying to the major.

"None, whatever. I couldn't see from the window more than a few feet."

"And was there anything you could see outside within those few feet?"

"Yes. A large tree grew just on the outside, and some of its branches came very near to the window."

"Was there anything about the tree by which you might identify it?"

There was a hesitating pause before she made reply:

"The tree had several large branches. One of them was dead and leafless. The others were green with leaves."

"We will try to find that tree," said Nick,

as he looked down into those large, black eyes.

Once more that shudder shook her frame, and this time she turned her face suddenly toward the wall.

"She had better go to bed," suggested Nick, addressing Major Keys.

Instantly Kate sprang to an upright position on the lounge. Her eyes showed undoubted fright, and she cried:

"No! no! Don't send me to my room. Let me remain here with papa till morning."

"You shall remain, my darling. Do not fear. I will not send you away," responded Keys.

"Then I shall leave you after asking a few more questions," said Nick. "I think you said, Major Keys, that Miss Kate was taken from her room above this by way of the window?"

"Yes."

"How do you know that?"

"Because her door was found locked on the inside, and the ladder used for the purpose was standing on the roof of the rear veranda and reached almost to her window-sill."

"Conclusive proof, I see," said Nick, nodding his head and turning toward the door.

As the butler was letting him out, Nick said to him:

"Oh, by the way, there was one thing I forgot to ask Major Keys. Possibly you can answer so that it will not be necessary to go back and disturb him. What school was it which Miss Kate attended?"

"The Wentworth Seminary, sir, in Connecticut," was the reply.

Nick thanked the man and went out into the night.

He was soon walking rapidly down into the village. As he strode along, he communed with himself:

"That little girl back there is as deep as

she's beautiful. I'll stake my reputation on it that she did not tell the whole truth about her twenty-four hours of adventure.

"Some of her story may be true, and I'm going to find out just how much of it is before I leave Salem.

"Meanwhile, I'd like to find two people—Mrs. Ellen Smith and the man who got on the Northern Express to-night as I got off. Two to one he has a red, drooping mustache, and a red scar on his left cheek.

"Yes, I think the girl actually met such a man during her absence, and that I saw the same man board the eleven o'clock train for the North.

"But Miss Kate has had rougher treatment than she pretends. Her dress is torn, two buttons are missing from her basque, and a layer has been lately wrenched from the heel of one of her shoes.

"Wonder if I can get a telegram off at this time of night? I'll try the railroad station. It may be open."

Nick did find the little station at Salem open and occupied, but only by the night agent.

The latter was busy making out a report of some kind.

He looked up as Nick entered and nodded in a friendly way, at the same time showing by the expression of his face that he was surprised to see any one at the station at that time of night.

"Pardon me for disturbing you," said Nick, as he leaned on the window of the office and looked in, "but I'm a stranger in Salem waiting for a train. Is there one for New York soon?"

"None which stops until seven o'clock in the morning."

"None which stops?" echoed Nick.

"Well, an express passes at three o'clock—in about an hour—but it goes right through with a rush."

"Where does it pass the eleven o'clock train north—the train I came on to Salem?"

"At Norwich, fifty miles above."

"Then if I had gone on to Norwich I could now be a New York passenger on the Southern Express, which will pass here in an hour?"

"Certainly."

"Did you sell any ticket to Norwich to-night?"

"No, but I sold one to Hempton. There was only one passenger for the train."

"Where is Hempton?"

"Forty miles beyond Norwich."

"What did the Hempton passenger look like?"

"I didn't see much of him. The fellow seemed unwilling to show much of his face, which he tried to conceal with a turned-up collar and slouch hat."

"Had he a beard?"

"I think not. But had a mustache."

"What color?"

"Red as Jersey mud."

"Thank you. Have you telegraphic connection with New York?"

"Yes."

"What time does that express reach New York?"

"Six-ten."

"Then I'll give you a message for transmission."

The agent passed a block of telegraphic blanks to Nick and he sat down to his instrument to call up the New York main office.

Nick wrote out the following message:

SALEM, September 15.

"MRS. NICHOLAS CARTER, New York City: Tell Chick to meet 6.10 train from North on this road, and follow tall passenger, with drooping mustache, and red scar on left cheek. Send Ida to Wentworth Seminary, Connecticut, to find out all worth knowing about Kate Keys, recent pupil. Have both report to me here. NICK."

The operator no sooner read the address

than he started. Then he looked at the signature and glanced up at Nick with astonishment written on every line of his features.

During the time Nick was talking to the agent he had been studying the young man as a doctor would study a patient.

Nick Carter reads faces and characters as easily as men ordinarily read books. His study of the station agent was made for a purpose. It was satisfactory.

When the message was transmitted, the operator looked up and remarked:

"So you are Nick Carter?"

"That is my name."

"What on earth are you doing in Salem? There's no work here for the greatest detective in the world, is there?"

"Isn't there, though?"

"And that red mustached man with the scar—how do you know he has a scar? I didn't tell you."

"No; I found that out from another source."

"And you're after him?"

"After him and—some other parties."

"Seems to me you'd keep your identity concealed," suggested the agent.

"That's just what I am going to do."

"But you have told me!"

"Yes. Do you know why?"

"I can't guess."

"Because I want to have some one in Salem whom I can trust, whom I can ask to co-operate with me in working on a mighty mysterious piece of business."

The agent's eyes began to shine with the light of excitement.

"And I am that one?"

"You are that one. I pride myself on never making a mistake in reading a man's characteristics in his face. I can trust you as if you were Chick, my assistant."

The agent's face flushed under the compliment. He thrust out his hand, and said, earnestly:

"You have not read me wrong, Mr. Carter. If I cannot be trusted, no man can."

"Then you will be of great help to me—What is your name?"

"Talbot—Sam Talbot."

"Let us sit down, Mr. Talbot. There is some information which I want to obtain. I think you can furnish part of it at least."

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT THE STATION AGENT KNEW.

The station agent opened the door to his private office and invited the detective to enter.

After they were seated, Nick proceeded at once to business.

"How long have you lived at Salem, Mr. Talbot?"

"All my life. I was born and reared here."

"Then you are well acquainted with all residents roundabout?"

"I guess I know 'em all."

"Know Major Keys?"

"Why, certainly."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Nicest kind."

"Know his family?"

"I know the younger girl, and I've seen the elder."

"The one called Belle?"

"Yes. She's to marry the Widow Hill's son, Benton, so the story goes, and I guess it's true, for Kate as good as told me so."

"You are on speaking acquaintance with the younger Miss Keys, then?"

"Oh, yes. She is a great girl to tramp around town and through the country. We've met a number of times—chance acquaintances, you know. I'd not think of calling on her at the hall, however."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, they're rich, and the major and his elder daughter are rather inclined to hold their heads high. I'm neither rich nor

a society man. Besides, Kate is a mere child. Yet she's old enough to be thinking of her future."

"Indeed!"

Nick had Talbot's gossip running in a line he was anxious to encourage.

"Oh, yes. Out here in this quiet place Kate has to talk to somebody. I have my afternoons to myself. We've been thrown together a great deal, and are both fond of tramping; sort of kindred spirits, you know. She looks upon me as a sort of big brother, I guess."

"A queer girl, eh?"

"I should say so. I can't make her out, Mr. Carter. She's a queer bundle."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, first, she's as strong as a young horse. I never saw so much strength in a girl's arms. Secondly, she's as agile as a cat or a sailor. You should see her climb a tree."

"Did you ever see her climb a tree?"

"Yes, once, and I tell you I was never so surprised in my life. Shall I tell you about it?"

"I'd like to hear of it."

"We'd been walking across the country, she and I, one afternoon about a month ago. Some two miles north of here, near the railroad, is an old farm-house that, until two weeks ago, was unoccupied and securely locked up.

"Well, we sat down in the farm-yard to rest. As we sat there we looked at the tall, three-storied house, all closed, shuttered, and, as it seemed, hermetically sealed, except an attic window, way up under the roof, which had been left open.

"Kate proposed that we should get in through that attic window and explore the house."

"Get in? How?"

"By climbing a tree which grew near that side of the house. It had four forks or big branches, one of which went right up against the window."

"Four branches," repeated Nick, as Kate's description of her alleged prison came to his mind. "Was one of the branches dead?"

"Yes. Why, have you been there?"

"No; but I think I know the tree. Go on."

"Well, I am no tree climber, and I confessed as much to her. Then she said if I'd remain where we were sitting, she'd show me what a girl could do in that line."

"And she did?"

"Didn't she? Why, she went up that tree like a squirrel. In less than five minutes she was perched on that limb almost on the edge of the attic window-sill."

"And did she go in?"

"No. She could look in, though, and said it was six or seven feet to the floor. She might have trouble getting out to the tree again, and I persuaded her not to try it."

"Did her father or sister know of these Tom-boy pranks?"

"I guess not. She dotes on her father, but there is no love lost on her sister."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but from this and that I can guess."

"And that guess is——"

"That she'd like to get all her father's money when he dies. I imagine, young as she is, too, she envies her sister the love of the son of the richest woman in this country."

"Mrs. Hill?"

"Yes."

"Is this Benton her only child?"

"Yes. And a very handsome sort of fellow he is, too, but proud and exclusive as a prince. I've never been able to get within forty rods of him socially. He only came here from college last year, and doesn't seem to care to mix with Salem people."

"Another queer party," smiled Nick.

"Yes, sir. That reminds me of something."

"What?"

"I saw him, last night, walking up the railroad about nine o'clock in the evening."

"Well, what of that?"

"Nothing. But he came sneaking back at two o'clock in the morning."

"That's strange."

"Yes, sir; and, what is stranger still, he made the same trip to-night."

"Sure?"

"I saw him. He went about eight o'clock. Only he came back earlier."

"How much earlier?"

"A good deal. He came in an hour before the train arrived which brought you from New York."

"Where do you suppose he had been?"

"Well, I've my suspicions."

"I'd like to hear them."

"Well, you remember about the vacant farm-house I was telling you of?"

"Where Miss Keys climbed the tree?"

"Exactly. Well, it's not empty now."

"Ah! Who lives there?"

"I don't know her name?"

"Her name? A woman?"

"Yes. A regular stunner."

"Young?"

"No. Forty, I guess; but handsome, for all that, and stylish."

"How long has she lived there?"

"About two weeks."

"Where did she come from?"

"I don't know; but from New York, I guess. I had the honor of sending her to that house."

"How so?"

"Well, I was here when she came in on the train. She asked me if I knew of a house for rent that was already furnished. That big farm-house was the only one near of the kind she wanted, and I sent her to the agent. I learned next day that she rented it and moved in."

"Alone?"

"Except a large negro woman—her servant, I reckon."

"And they have been there ever since?"

"She has. The negro woman went to New York yesterday on the four o'clock train, Purchased a round-trip ticket, but has not yet returned."

"Who owns the house?"

"Benton Hill's mother."

"Why was it furnished, yet closed?"

"She furnished it last spring for a man from Boston, who rented it for a summer boarding-house. The man's wife died the first week after they came here. Then he forfeited his rent and returned to Boston."

"You believe Benton Hill was visiting the occupant of that house last night and to-night?"

"That's what."

"Well, he probably went in the interest of his mother?"

"I guess not, else he'd have gone in the daytime and not staid so long. I tell you, there's something wrong about the woman in that farm-house, and Benton Hill knows what it is."

"Humph!" ejaculated Nick, looking at the ground.

"And I'll bet a dollar," continued Talbott, "that she's one of the parties you're after."

"I shouldn't be surprised if she is, Mr. Talbott," assented Nick.

"Whom do you suspect she is?"

"A woman named Smith."

Talbott laughed.

"You're not joking, Mr. Carter?"

"No."

"Then who and what is she?"

"I must first find out whether she is the right party. When did you see Kate Keys last?"

"Two days ago. She came to the depot to see her sister off to New York. Isn't she at home?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, then—— Excuse me, there comes the express."

Talbott rushed out with his lantern. A few minutes later the express thundered by.

When he came back, Nick said: "That means it's three o'clock?"

"It's nearly half-past three. She's twenty-five minutes late."

"Talbott," said Nick, rising, "I'm going to take a stroll up the road."

"Where?"

"Toward that farm-house. I'm going to get a look at it."

"Not call on the lady at this hour?"

"Only see where she is hidden away."

"What does it all mean, Mr. Carter?"

"When I come back I'll tell you more. Meanwhile, I rely on your honor to keep everything you've learned from me to-night to yourself."

As Nick walked out, Talbott stared after him for fully a minute, then he muttered, as he scratched his head:

"Tell me more, eh! Well, what in thunder has he told me? Keep everything I've learned to myself! Now, what in the name of Freemasonry have I learned from him. Here I've been giving up my innermost soul to him for an hour or more, hoping that his turn would come next, and he walks out on me with a promise to tell me more when he returns."

"When he returns! Will he come back? Going up to investigate things about that house, is he? Well, Mrs. Mystery, if you have done anything wicked I'd not give much for your freedom, now that Nick Carter has located you."

Half an hour later Nick was standing under that tree in the rear of the huge, barn-like farm-house.

He looked up in the gray dawn—for day was breaking—and could distinguish the open attic window, the branch of the tree, which projected near, and the huge dead limb, which shot out in another direction.

Then he cast his eyes toward the ground, but it was too dark to see objects distinctly in that direction, so he lighted his small lantern and began to shoot it around near the trunk of the tree.

"I'll see if there are any tell-tale tracks in—— Hello! what's this?"

He stooped and picked up an irregularly shaped piece of leather.

It was a layer from the small heel of a shoe.

"Hum!" he muttered. "I've seen the little shoe which lost this piece of leather."

He slipped it into his pocket and started around the house. To his surprise, he found one of the shutters to a window on the first floor of the house standing ajar. All the rest were tightly closed and fastened.

A light came out of the opening made by the swinging shutter.

Nick approached and looked in.

It was a sitting-room.

A lamp burned upon a table near the centre.

Something large lay upon the floor near a full-length mirror, which stood against the wall opposite the window.

It did not take a second look to convince Nick that the prostrate object was the body of a woman lying face downward.

He tried the window, but it was fastened and would not move.

Then he started around the house, examining the windows and doors as he went.

He found a door leading into the kitchen from the rear open.

Without hesitation, he entered, and with the aid of his lantern, made his way to the sitting-room, where the body lay.

He turned it over.

The white, rigid face which stared up at him was that of a dead woman.

She must have been forty years of age and retained traces of great beauty even in the rigors of death.

"This is Mrs. Smith, I have no doubt," muttered Nick. "She has been murdered."

His eyes had noticed a few stains of blood around a slit in the woman's gown over the region of the heart.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAGEDY IN THE OLD FARM-HOUSE.

In a rapid, thorough manner, peculiar to the great detective, Nick Carter proceeded to make an investigation of the room in which the murdered woman was found.

That which struck his attention first was the condition of the panel mirror, which stood almost against the head of the corpse.

On this mirror some scrawling letters had been marked.

They had evidently been traced by a finger dipped in blood, and read:

Book Case

"Daniel Dykeman"

"Page 219"

The position of the body was such as to suggest that the desperately wounded woman had dragged herself to the foot of the mirror, dipped the index finger of her right hand into her own blood, traced the letters and figures on the mirror with her departing strength, and barely finished, as was shown by the long streak which ran from the last figure to the foot of the mirror.

The right arm of the corpse was extended and rested against the frame of the mirror, when Nick first reached the room.

The index finger of this hand was bloody on the end.

Having deciphered the bloody message, Nick looked around.

He saw a small, old-fashioned book-case at the opposite side of the room.

A short scrutiny of its contents disclosed a book, on the back of which was the title, "Daniel Dykeman; or, Who Killed Dorotha Drew."

Before he drew the book from its place, his eyes made a hasty inventory of everything inside. Then he carefully pulled it from its place and inspected the covering.

The result seemed to be perfectly satisfactory.

"Wonder what is in the book at page two-hundred and something?"

Soliloquizing thus, he opened the book at page 210 and began to turn the leaves.

He turned only two, when several pieces of paper fluttered from between the leaves and fell upon the floor.

He picked them up and ran his eyes over their contents.

Not a feature of his face showed surprise or uncertainty as a result of what he read.

He merely ejaculated, "Humph!" and turned his attention to the pages of the book between which the loose pages were hidden.

On page 214 was the beginning of chapter thirty-one of the story. It was the concluding chapter of the novel, and was entitled, "The Mystery Explained."

Nick carefully replaced the written pages in the book and thrust the volume into one of his huge pockets.

Then he went back to the body of the victim, where he knelt down and made a thorough examination of the wound.

Something about the wound attracted his attention.

The result was that he produced a small pair of surgical nippers, inserted them into the wound, and, after several attempts, pulled something from the bloody opening.

It was a knife blade, which had been broken off in the body.

The fragment of blade was about three

inches long, and had belonged to a very large pocket-knife.

Laying the blade on the table, Nick began a search of the room.

He was looking for the knife from which the fatal blade had been broken. He found it in a small stove near the book-case. The blade fitted exactly.

Both parts were carefully wrapped up and thrust into another of Nick's capacious pockets.

Then the detective renewed his search.

The investigation finally led him to the attic room, whose one small window, high up toward the roof, gave light and air to the lonesome apartment.

The detective's first act, on entering this room, was to look out through that solitary window.

He saw the limb of the tree which grew almost into the window.

Then he moved around into different places and looked up and out.

He was looking for the dead fork of the tree.

It was not visible from any part of the attic.

In the next place he directed his scrutiny to a lot of debris, which lay around the room in disorder, and presently fished out of a pile of old, worn-out shoes a small paper ball not larger than a bullet.

It had apparently been rolled up in the hand and dropped there.

Nick carefully unrolled it and smoothed out its creases.

It was an oblong piece of plain white paper. There was neither writing nor printing on it.

The detective probably did not expect to find letters, figures, or characters of any kind on the paper, for he did not even scrutinize its surface casually.

But he no sooner had it straightened out than he put it to his nose.

Instantly the light from his eyes seemed to

grow a little brighter, and there was just the slightest twinkle of satisfaction in them.

The bit of white paper was as carefully put away in his pocket-book as if it had been a check for ten thousand dollars.

Just as he was about to leave the attic he once more glanced out through the window.

Something which he saw arrested his steps. He went over to the window and reached up.

His hands barely reached the sill of the window, but he got sufficient hold to draw himself up by the force of the mighty muscles of his arms.

Once on the window-sill, he reached out and picked something from the limb of the tree.

This something was scarcely larger than the piece of white paper, and as soon as he had descended to the floor, he put it into his pocket-book with that same bit of paper.

Then he went down stairs and left the house without going back to the room in which the tragedy had been committed.

Nick strode off down the railroad toward the station, and as he walked rapidly along, he spoke aloud, as if addressing a companion:

"Now, then, I am going to have a little quiet talk with Mr. Benton Hill and see what he will have to say about the things which I have found back there where the dead woman lies."

CHAPTER VI.

THE NAME ON THE HANDLE OF THE KNIFE.

Sam Talbott, the station agent, was just leaving the depot as Nick came along on his return from the visit to the farm-house. Talbott's time was up, and having turned the office over to the day agent, he was going to his boarding-house to take his usual breakfast and daylight sleep.

Nick joined him, and the two walked up town together.

"Well, what did you find out up there?" asked Talbott, as they proceeded.

"It's very quiet about the house," said Nick. "Seems to me that woman would be afraid to stay alone in the old barn of a place. But I am anxious to find the man with the red mustache and the scarred cheek."

"Well, you'll not find him here."

"No. I guess not. But he has been here, and I want you to find out what he was doing in Salem."

"How can I?"

"If you'll inquire, I think you'll discover that he has been out to see the occupant of that old farm-house, and that his business was with her. Now, I'd like to have you go out there, and, depending on your previous meeting with the lady, ask her whether such a man has been to see her."

"I will go. Where will I find you when I return from the farm-house?"

"At the hotel. If I am not there, wait for me. And, Mr. Talbott!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Remember your word of honor; do not betray my identity or business, no matter what may occur."

"I will remember. Depend on me."

As Nick left Talbott and went to the hotel for breakfast something very much like a smile illuminated his face.

After breakfast he inquired his way to the elegant home of Mrs. Susan Hill, the widow.

Signs of great wealth and luxurious living met him on every hand as he was ushered into the reception-room by the butler.

He asked to see Mr. Benton Hill.

"Will you have the kindness to send Mr. Hill your card?" bowed the stately servant.

"Say to Mr. Hill that a friend from New York is here and has a surprise for him."

The message had the desired effect. Several minutes later a tall, very handsome, proud-appearing young man entered the room

and looked eagerly and earnestly at the detective.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, "are you the person who just sent a message by the butler?"

Nick bowed and replied:

"I have that honor."

"That you were a friend from New York and brought me a surprise?"

"That was my message."

Benton Hill drew himself up haughtily and said, in an icy tone:

"Is this some jest, sir? I don't know you."

"It is far from a jest, Mr. Hill, as you will soon discover. And you shall know me as soon as we are assured of being alone. For your sake, no one should hear what I have to say to you."

Hill stood as if hesitating about what he should do.

Finally curiosity got the best of him. He closed the door behind him and advanced close to where Nick stood.

"Well, sir, we are now alone. Nobody but me can hear what you have to say."

"I sent word that I was your friend."

Hill nodded.

"Presently you will acknowledge as much. I also promised you should know who I am. Let me introduce myself."

Nick handed him a card on which was his name and profession.

Hill looked at this card. First his face grew red and then very pale. Slowly his eyes were raised to the visitor's face.

"You are the great detective?"

Nick nodded assent.

"And you bring me a surprise?" he managed to say, with a slightly unsteady voice.

"You shall judge whether I do not keep that promise. Mr. Hill, the woman who moved into your mother's furnished farmhouse, two miles up the railroad, a fortnight ago, is dead."

For some seconds after Nick had finished

speaking, Benton Hill stood staring at him with blanched face and parted lips. Then he tottered and almost fell into a chair.

"For God's sake, tell me what you are driving at!" he gasped.

"I am driving at nothing. I am telling you the truth. Mrs. Ellen Smith died some time last night."

"Last night?"

"I said last night. Probably after you left her."

"I—you know——"

"I know a great deal more than any one except you and she did about your peculiar relationship."

"And she is dead! You are sure?"

There was a tone of eager expectancy in Hill's voice.

"I am quite sure. She is as dead as a woman can be who has had a knife driven into her heart."

"What! Not murdered!"

"Yes; murdered."

"By whom?"

"That we must find out. I have said she was stabbed to the heart. The blade of the knife was broken off in the wound."

"My God!"

"I found the body early this morning on a visit to the house. Without interference from any one, I pulled the knife blade from the wound. Then I found the handle to which the blade belonged. It had been hidden by the assassin in an old stove."

Hill sat staring at Nick as if fascinated.

"The handle had an engraved name on one side," continued the detective.

"A name—whose?"

"I will show it to you," said Nick.

First he took out his pocket-book and produced the broken blade. Then he reached into his pocket, and drawing forth the handle, he, by a quick movement, placed the two together and held them before Hill's eyes.

The young man started from his chair. There was a half gasp, half groan, and he fell back into the seat as if some one had forced him down.

"The name on the handle," continued Nick, "is Benton Hill."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT WAS IN THE BOOK AT PAGE 214.

Before Hill could recover his powers of speech, Nick went on, in a matter of fact, quiet tone of voice, as if he were talking upon the most matter of fact sort of thing:

"This is not only your knife, Mr. Hill, but I have positive proof that you were at the house of this Mrs. Smith night before last until considerable after midnight, and again last night for several hours."

The effect of these words was to arouse the young man and cause him to ask:

"And do you think, then, that I killed the woman?"

Nick's reply must have been a great surprise.

"No, sir; I do not! On the contrary, I know you did not."

Hill stretched out his hand and exclaimed:

"Thank you! You have at last kept your word and proven that you are my friend indeed. You say you know I did not do the murder. How do you know it?"

"In several ways. Chiefly by means of this knife and its broken blade. In the first place, the knife didn't kill her."

"What! You said she was stabbed to the heart."

"So she was—after she was dead."

"Ah! How did you find that out?"

"The blood which came from the wound was not much, and what there was of it was venous, and not the crimson, lighter-colored arterial blood from the heart."

"That shows——"

"That shows that the heart had ceased to

beat before the knife blade penetrated the organ. And besides, while the wound was made with this knife, the blade was not broken off in the wound."

"How can you tell?"

"Thus: had the blade been so broken, the knife must have been twisted or wrenched to produce such a result. The state of the wound shows no such evidence.

"Besides, you will see that the point is broken from the blade."

"That is true—a small part of it is."

"Well, the point was broken after the wound was made. Otherwise the blade would not have been so easily driven into the body."

"And so you know——"

"Stop. I have other proofs that the blade was not broken off in the body."

"I am all attention, Mr. Carter."

"In searching for the handle of the knife, which I knew I would find conveniently hidden in the room as soon as I was convinced that the wound had been made after death for a purpose, I found this on the floor beside a drum stove, near the wall."

Nick picked a minute shining object from his pocket-book and handed it to Hill.

"The point of the blade," said Hill, as he examined it.

"Exactly. Well, I found a bright, small spot on the fender of the stove, such as would be made by a sharp-pointed steel instrument falling on iron. So I concluded the blade had struck there and lost its point.

"The point fell upon the floor and was overlooked by the assassin; the blade fell into the ashes of the hearth."

"How did you find that out?"

"By finding just the least trace of ashes on the dress of the victim near the wound and on the edge of the wound itself. Indeed, it was this ash clew which sent me searching around the stove.

"After these discoveries I decided that the

door had been used as a vise to hold the blade while it was broken from the handle."

"And was it?"

"Yes. A few spots of blood from the blade were left upon the door where it pressed the blade against the body of the stove.

"The finding of the knife handle in the stove was another natural result, because by that time I knew as well as if I had seen it done that the assassin had put the handle where it would not be difficult to find it.

"Why?"

"Wait. The ashes on the clothes and the edge of the wound were put there when the murderer unbuttoned the dress to get at the wound and thrust the knife blade back with the fingers."

"Good heavens! What a nerve the scoundrel must have had! But the motive of all this?"

"Was to fix the crime upon some one else—upon you, evidently."

"It is inconceivable! Who could have done it?"

"Whom do you think? Can you imagine?"

"I cannot; on my honor."

"How did your knife get there?"

"I haven't the faintest conception."

"When did you lose it?"

"I was not aware till just now that I had lost it."

"When did you have it in your possession last?"

"I am unable to remember."

"Well, when you have time to sit down and think, I want you to try to recall when and where you had this knife last in your possession."

"Why?"

"It may aid me in finding the assassin and determining the motive which brought the knife into the tragedy."

"If the stab did not kill the woman, what did, Mr. Carter?"

Nick studied a moment before he replied: "Heart failure."

Hill gave him a half-doubting look. Before he could say anything, however, Nick drew his attention elsewhere:

"I found the body lying near a panel mirror with one hand outstretched and the index finger bloody.

"On the mirror, in blood letters traced by a finger, was a message or words of direction."

"What were they?"

Nick repeated the words and figures he had seen written on the mirror.

"Who wrote those words?"

"Not the dying woman, as was intended it should be believed."

"Why not?"

"Because I thought I told you she was dead before she was stabbed."

"That is true. How stupid I am."

"And what is more, the letters were traced by a finger of a different size from the bloody one on the corpse?"

"Larger?"

"No, smaller."

"What did the words mean?"

"They called attention to something in a certain book at a certain page."

"What was the something? Did you find it?"

"Yes. It was an explanation of the nature of your night business at the old farm-house."

Hill's face became almost as pale as it was when Nick had shown him the broken knife.

"Impossible! She did not dare!" he whispered.

"Strange as it may seem, I found in that book at that page, several papers. One was a marriage certificate."

"Ah!" breathed the young man, as he sat with bloodless face looking at Nick, who went on, placidly:

"It was dated twenty-four years ago and recorded the marriage of Nathaniel Hill,

twenty-four years of age, to Ellen Gascon Smith, eighteen years of age, a resident of Cuba.

"The second paper was a certificate of the birth of their son, one year later—of Benton Gascon Hill.

"The third was a memorandum. Shall I tell you what it was?"

"If you so desire," muttered Hill.

"It was a brief statement from the pen of one who signed herself Ellen Gascon Hill, *nee* Smith.

"In it the writer declared that she was married to Nathaniel Hill twenty-four years ago. That, one year later, she bore him a son, who was duly christened Benton Gascon Hill.

"That seven years later still she eloped with a man named Smith and went to San Francisco, where he was soon afterward convicted of the double crime of murder and burglary and executed.

"Since then her sole object has been to find her son and claim him as her own, and disgrace the woman who afterward believed she was Nathaniel Hill's widow."

"My mother!" moaned young Hill.

"Your step-mother," corrected Nick.

"She has been like a mother to me. She knows nothing about that miserable woman's history. Father, I believe, kept it from her. This will kill her."

"It might kill her if she knew. But she need not."

"You forget the papers which you found in that book."

"She was trying to sell you those papers and her silence?"

"Yes."

"And asked a good price, I'll be bound?"

"One hundred thousand dollars."

"Payable when?"

"On delivery of the two certificates."

"You would have paid the price?"

"I had about made up my mind to sacrifice that much of my private fortune."

"Then you are fortunate. I make you a present of what she held in such high price."

Nick reached in his pocket, pulled out a small package of papers, and handed them to Hill.

The latter received them as one dazed.

"You don't mean it?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

"But they'll have to be produced—made public, anyhow," groaned Hill.

"How so?"

"At the inquest. You'll have to testify at the inquest, and then——"

"I don't expect to testify at the inquest," interrupted Nick.

"Why, you'll have to. You found the body."

"No one will know it unless you tell them, and I don't believe you will," smiled Nick.

"They'll not find these papers."

"No, nor a knife, nor the book referred to in the message—nor several other things."

"You'll not come forward, then, and tell your story?"

"Not if I know my business. I'll just let the Salem authorities puzzle their detective powers over the mystery. I'll bet they'll not come within a mile of the truth."

"Mr. Carter," cried the young man, springing to his feet and taking Nick's hand in both his own, "how can I ever repay you for your kindness?"

"By admitting to the coroner, if summoned, that you visited the deceased at that house after night on business the nature of which you refuse to reveal, but which had nothing to do with her death."

"I—testify before the coroner? Surely——"

"I think you'll be summoned. You were seen going toward that house and coming away."

"By whom?"

"By Sam Talbott. Maybe by others."

"They'll suspect me, then, after all."

"No. Another will come in for the suspicion."

"Who?"

"A stranger with a drooping red mustache and a scar on his face."

"I saw him!" eagerly exclaimed Hill.

"When?"

"Last night!"

"Where?"

"I almost ran over him when leaving the farm-house. I certainly surprised the fellow while he was creeping up toward the house."

"When was that? What hour?"

"About half-past nine o'clock."

"Good. Tell it to the coroner. I'll see to it that your testimony has corroborative proof."

"Did that man murder her?"

"I think he could at least tell who did."

"Where is he?"

"In New York."

"Can you produce him?"

"I'm going to try."

"He may know that woman's history."

"I think he does. That's what makes me more anxious than ever to get my hands on him."

"Good, Lord, man, not to make it public."

"Oh, no, but to prove to your perfect satisfaction what I have circumstantial proofs of already."

"What is that?"

"Why, that the woman who was murdered last night was not your mother—was never the wife of your father; and that therefore your beloved step-mother has a right to the honored name your father left her."

CHAPTER VIII.

A BUTTON WORTH A FORTUNE.

Without further explanation Nick left the Hill residence and went up to Locksley Hall, as Major Keys' home was nicknamed by the residents of Salem.

The major greeted him pleasantly, but there was a worn, weary look upon his face which Nick was quick to notice.

"How is Miss Kate?" he asked.

"Very restless. She has not slept all night, and she acts so strangely."

"Acts strangely? How?"

"Well, she is not her own bright self. Her nerves have been greatly shocked. She looks at me so oddly at times, and becomes most hysterical every now and then. I never saw her in such a state."

Nick changed the subject.

"Major Keys, what proof have you that the woman who claims to be your last wife is really what she pretends?"

"I have proofs which must remain undisputed," was the slowly-spoken reply.

"In what form?"

"That of a scar."

"A scar?"

"You may remember I told you that when I left her for dead on the night when I fled with her little girl, the knife was still sticking in the wound in the upper part of the breast?"

"I remember."

"Well, this woman showed me the scar of that old wound."

"Otherwise you would not have recognized her?"

"Not by her appearance. She has grown much stouter and coarser. But she knows so much about those early days that I could scarcely doubt her identity even if the scar were not there."

"What will you do about her proposition?"

"I don't know. I shall not give up Kate, no matter what I am made to suffer personally. I love the child dearly, and I know her well enough to believe that a revelation of the truth would break her heart, maybe kill her."

"She is proud of her family station?"

"You don't know how proud. Mr. Carter,

you must find that woman for me. Maybe she can be bought off with money."

"I will find her for you, major. And I promise you that you will never be forced to acknowledge her as your wife."

As Nick left the house, he, for some reason, suddenly looked back and upward. Some unseen influence seemed to draw his gaze in that one direction.

It was the direction of a window on the second floor.

A face looked out of that window. A pair of dark eyes were watching him.

He got but a glance of the face. Then it disappeared like a flash.

The only effect it had on Nick was to cause him to compress his lips and partly smother a sigh.

At that moment his attention was diverted by a sound, which was a conglomeration of "Creak, crawk, thud, splish, splash."

It came from a small wooden inclosure not far from the stables. The door was standing open, and Nick, looking through, noticed that two men were engaged within at some work.

Instantly it flashed on his mind that this was the old well-house, which had been twice mentioned.

Nick changed his course slightly and entered the building.

He found the two men engaged in drawing water by use of a windlass, around which was wound a rope, which let one bucket down as the second was drawn up.

"Is that water fit to drink?" asked the detective, as he looked in.

"It's the best water in the county, sir," said one of the couple. "Will you try it, sir?"

He dipped a cup in the bucket and handed it to Nick, who had approached close to the opening.

While pretending to be enjoying the water, Nick's quick eyes were taking in every square inch of surface within the four walls.

Suddenly they rested on an object almost at his feet that sent a thrill of satisfaction through his heart.

Pretending to wipe his mouth, he dropped his handkerchief.

It fell over the object.

When he picked up the handkerchief he also picked up the object and put both in his pocket together.

The object was nothing but a pearl button.

Yet Nick would not have parted with that button for the finest diamond stud in Tiffany's store.

"Is the well deep?" he asked, peering down into its fathomless depths.

"Full a hundred feet, sir," was the reply.

Nick thanked the man and turned to leave.

At the door he almost ran against Kate Keys.

Her face was deathly pale. She looked at Nick with something like terror in her black eyes.

The detective apologized for his apparent awkwardness and said:

"I stopped to get a drink. It is excellent water."

The girl said not a word, but turned and almost ran toward the house.

As Nick continued his way down toward the village, he said to himself:

"I'll bet my head against a foot-ball that I know where Keys' stolen diamonds are. Before I grow many days older I'm going down to get them."

He had scarcely reached the hotel when Talbott came rushing in on him, white-faced, breathless, and excited.

"Why, what is the matter?"

"She has been murdered?" gasped Talbott.

"Who?"

"That woman at the farm-house—Mrs. Smith, you called her."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure! I saw her lying there dead as a mackerel. She was stabbed."

With a little persuasion, Nick got Talbott to tell him a great deal which he, of course, knew already, but the effect was what the detective wanted.

The station agent did not suspect that Nick had a previous knowledge of the woman's death.

"What shall I do about it?" finally asked Talbott.

"You can do but one thing. You must go right away and notify the coroner."

"Why, what excuse can I have for going there at this time in the day? It might arouse suspicion against me."

"Not if you lose no time in sending the coroner to the scene. He will know she has been dead some hours, and you could easily prove an *alibi* for the night. Say you didn't feel sleepy and were taking a morning walk. And, Talbott!"

"Well, sir?"

"Don't forget the man with the red mustache and the scar on his face, when you talk to the coroner."

"And how about Benton Hill?"

"Tell all about him you may know."

Talbott left for the coroner's office. An hour later Salem was in the throes of a great excitement over the mysterious murder of the strange woman at the old farm-house.

All day Nick remained about the hotel quietly watching and listening.

Chick came in on the noon train from New York and was soon closeted with Nick.

"I've found my man and left Patsy to watch him till I get back," said Chick. "Here I am for further instructions."

The two detectives drew their chairs close together, and for the next hour engaged in earnest conversation.

There was a train for the city at two o'clock, and it carried Chick back, but not till Nick had addressed him with these parting words:

"I'll expect you to-morrow morning. You ought to get your information to-night and be ready to come back on the first train out to-morrow."

Later in the day Ida also came in from Connecticut.

"Well, I've been to Wentworth Seminary," she said, as soon as she and Nick were safe from chance observation and eavesdroppers.

"And got the information you went after?"

"I think so. What do you want to know about the girl?"

"Some of her peculiar traits."

"Well, she was one of the finest performers ever seen in the seminary gymnasium."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Her performances in climbing and on the ladders were wonderful."

"That's good. Had she any particular traits?"

"Several. First, she was very proud of her family, particularly of her father. She was also passionately fond of him and he of her. He visited her often, and their affection for each other was the talk of the seminary."

After some further conversation between Nick and his young lady assistant, the latter was dismissed and sent back to New York.

She had scarcely gone when Major Keys came to the hotel looking for Nick.

He was trying hard to suppress his excitement, but didn't succeed so far as Nick was concerned.

"You have heard of the murdered woman in the house up the railroad?" he asked.

"Who is there in Salem that has not?" was Nick's reply.

"Do you know who she was?"

"I think I do. Her name was Ellen Smith. She called herself by that name, I mean."

"That was her name. She was the woman who was once my wife."

"Major, for once you are mistaken."

"Mistaken? No! no! Mr. Carter. I have seen the body. There can be no mistake. It is she who visited me three nights ago."

"That is true, I don't doubt. But she is not the woman you married in New Orleans fourteen years ago."

"Why, what are you talking about? Did I not see the wound of that horrible knife cut? Did she not show it to me in evidence of her claim?"

"She showed you a wound, yes. The scar of a deep burn, not of a deep cut."

"How do you know that?"

"I made a careful examination of the scar, and I am not to be deceived thereby."

Nick then related as much of his discovery of the murder as he saw fit, concealing the facts about the knife and the book and its contents.

"Besides, I believe you described your second wife to be a slightly built woman of very dark complexion and coal-black hair."

"Yes, but she could have grown stout."

"True, but there would have been no necessity for staining her face, neck, arms, and upper part of the chest to make them appear darker than the natural color of the body?"

"She had done that?"

"Yes, and that black hair on her head was dyed. Its natural color, I think, was no darker than auburn."

"Who was she, then?"

"I'll be able to tell you maybe in a few days."

After cautioning the major in some things, Nick sent him away in much better spirits than he had felt for several days.

"Now I want to hear from that man with the red mustache and scar on the face," muttered Nick. "Then if Chick and Patsy succeed in heading off that negro servant before she gets back to Salem, I'll bet a row of buttons this country coroner and his jury will

never discover who it was that killed that woman."

CHAPTER IX.

DOWN IN THE OLD WELL.

The inquest was set for the day following the discovery of the murder. Meantime the local authorities were making great efforts to get to the bottom of the mystery.

Early in the forenoon of the day of the inquest Chick came up to Salem for the second time. Once more he and Nick were closeted for nearly an hour.

Then Nick called for writing-paper, pen and ink.

For another hour he was busy with the stationery. He covered page after page of the paper and wrote upon one side of it only.

When he finished, Chick secured the manuscript, placed it in "Daniel Dykeman," the book Nick took from the old farm-house—placed it in the book at page 214.

Then he thrust book and manuscript into his valise and was soon on his way back to New York.

Nick had just time to reach the old farm-house in time to be present at the beginning of the inquest.

Talbott stood well in the public esteem, and his story was accepted by the coroner without suspicion.

The station agent did not withhold his information about Benton Hill's movements, and that young man was called to the stand to testify.

He told of his visits to the farm-house, but would not tell why he went there.

His testimony concerning the red mustached stranger lurking about the house corroborated Talbott's testimony about the same person.

There were also two farmers who had met the same mysterious stranger in the vicinity of the scene of the murder during the day preceding the crime.

The fact that the dying woman, in writing on the mirror, had not written the name of her murderer was considered proof that she knew the name would not be known in Salem.

"Daniel Dykeman," therefore, it was decided, must have been the name of a book, which was in the book-case at the time.

A girl, who had lived with the Boston family as a parlor-maid during the brief period they occupied the house, remembered the book-case and its small case of books distinctly. They were the only books in the house at the time.

She was fond of reading and had learned the titles of every book in the collection and could repeat them by heart.

She did repeat them just as the jury found them, but "Daniel Dykeman" was not in the list.

This girl's testimony was intensely interesting to Nick. It had the effect on the coroner and his jury to convince them that after all "Daniel Dykeman" might have been the name of the murderer.

But what did "Book-case" and the page number mean?

The verdict was returned as follows:

"Came to her death from a knife wound in her breast, inflicted by an unknown man, who had a drooping red mustache and a scar on his left cheek."

All the time the testimony was being given Nick stood watching a girl, who had worked herself well up into the crowd where she could hear and see all.

It was Kate Keys, looking scarcely less pale and haggard than when Nick saw her on the night when she returned from her mysterious adventure.

When the verdict was rendered, it was hard for Nick to realize whether it pleased or displeased the girl.

As the crowd began to scatter, after the

verdict was rendered, Kate turned and confronted Nick.

At first she flushed and then her face took on a frightened look.

Nick politely raised his hat, however, and spoke so cheerily that the girl was soon chatting with him about the inquest, and presently they started together to walk back to town.

As they proceeded, Kate said:

"Mr. Carter, papa sent for you while I was missing to hunt me up, did he not?"

"That is right, Miss Kate."

"Well, I think I can help clear up the mystery."

"Good! How?"

"I've found out where I was confined during my absence."

"Where?"

"Back there in that farm-house."

"How do you know?"

"I saw the high attic window and the dead limb of the tree just outside."

"I noticed those same things, Miss Keys. There is no doubt about that being the place."

She shot him a swift, curious look. What she saw in his face seemed to satisfy her.

She made no reply for a while. Then she said:

"Isn't it strange that the knife wasn't found?"

"It is strange. But the red-mustached man no doubt carried his knife away with him."

"And the book! It certainly must have been a book to which the poor woman referred in those letters of blood."

"That is my belief."

"Mr. Carter, I'd give a great deal to see that book and find out what was at page 214."

"At page—what?"

The girl's face once more grew white. She realized that she had blundered when it was too late to recall her words.

"Why, the figures were evidently 214 in

spite of the unfinished figure," she managed to say.

"Did you see the bloody marks, then?"

"Why, certainly."

"Oh!"

The manner in which Nick uttered that "Oh" evidently gave Kate additional trouble.

Nothing more was said on the subject, and they soon parted.

When Nick reached the hotel he found Benton Hill waiting for him.

"I remember about the knife now," the young man said. "Where it was I had last used it?"

"Remember what about it?"

"Where?"

"On the lawn at Major Keys'. I had taken it from my pocket to trim a switch cane for Miss Belle. I now remember laying it temporarily on a rustic seat, and have no recollection of ever picking it up again."

"Thank you," quietly replied Nick.

Some time later Nick visited a store and bought a fishing reel and about one hundred and twenty feet of stout line. Then he invested in a dime's worth of rather large-sized fish-hooks.

About eleven o'clock that night Nick left the hotel and strolled out of the village.

He had in his possession the reel and line with all the hooks and a two-ounced lead sinker attached to the end. In his pocket was also his trusted dark lantern, a tallow candle, a small can of oil, and some matches.

Leaving the village, he turned his steps toward Locksley Hall, but he didn't go nearer the house than was necessary to make observations such as he desired.

For nearly two hours he moved around among the shadows in the grounds.

One by one he saw the lights go out. Then came a time when he concluded that it was time for action.

A few minutes later he was in the old well-house and had shut the door behind him.

First he looked down into the black hole.

He might as well have looked into a jug.

Then he tied his tallow candle to the end of his fish-line, lit the wick, and began to lower it, watching the speck of light as it went down with some anxiety.

A hundred feet of the line had been paid out and still the candle burned.

Then he saw the sheen of the water in the well as the hook struck its surface and made it quiver.

"No foul air down there," he thought. "If I want to go down I can do it without fear of being overcome."

He drew up the line, detached his candle, and lowered the hook again.

This time he let the hook descend into the water.

Then followed considerable "fishing," but without the success he had hoped for.

"It's no use," he muttered. "I'll save time by going down."

Again he drew up his line. This time he examined the part that was wet.

"There is about ten feet of water down there," he soliloquized. "Well, I'm going down if I break a leg to do it."

"But first I must oil up this old windlass, or its creaking will arouse the neighborhood."

Ten minutes were spent with the oil can, after which Nick turned the windlass several times and found that the creaking had been destroyed.

Then he got ready to descend, after first having cut off about twenty feet of the fish-line. This, with his lantern, he put into one of the buckets and then lowered it until the bucket barely touched the surface of the water.

His next move was to secure the windlass so that it would not turn one way or the other.

Throwing his reel to one side, the detective took off his coat and shoes and prepared for his descent.

"It's not the first time I have descended a hundred feet on a rope hand over hand and climbed back the same way," he muttered. "What I've done once I can do again."

With these words on his lips, he caught hold of the rope, swung himself off, and began to descend with something like the agility of a monkey.

Down, down into the black hole he went until he stood with his feet resting in the bottom of the bucket.

With one hand he held fast to the rope. With the other he got out his fragment of fish-line and began to drag the bottom of the well.

"Unless they are, as I believe, wrapped in some articles of clothing this plan will not raise the diamonds," he said to himself. "But I'm as sure they are down there as—— Ah! ha!"

The fish-hooks had taken hold of something at that moment.

Carefully he drew his catch up to the surface and held it in the light of the lantern.

It was not a large package, and a very little examination showed Nick that it was a woman's silk stocking rolled up into a ball not larger than a walnut and in turn enveloped in a large towel.

There was in the towel, also, a heavy paper-weight, which had been used as a sinker.

Several pieces of stout cord secured the towel around the paper-weight and the stocking.

"Who would think that there are one hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels in this bundle?" chuckled Nick, as he patted his "fish." "Now, I'll crawl out of this hole and get to bed like——"

A terrible interruption cut his soliloquy short.

The rope which held him and the bucket suspended above the cold water of the well was violently agitated.

In a flash of thought Nick realized that somebody had hold of the rope at the mouth of the well.

He looked up and saw the black disk of an object, which appeared about the size of a human head.

At the same moment something gave way, the bucket in which he stood turned, and he was plunged sideways into the ice-cold waters of the well.

As he fell his head struck one of the slimy stones of the wall just as the deadly danger of his situation flashed upon him.

Then came a chill as if a ton of ice had fallen upon him, a ringing in the ears and—all was a blank.

CHAPTER X.

KATE KEYS READS THE LAST CHAPTER.

Much excitement prevailed at Locksley Hall next morning.

When the gardener had gone to draw water from the old well he found the windlass fastened so that it could not be turned and the rope cut close to the cylinder.

Major Keys was notified while at breakfast.

He arose from the table and went to the old well-house, accompanied by his daughter Kate, and found it as his gardener had represented.

"It is very strange," murmured Major Keys. "When you have had your breakfast, Johnson, get some help and recover the rope from the bottom of the well. Kate, let us go to breakfast."

Half an hour later, as the major strolled out on the lawn for a smoke, a boy met him and give him a note.

The note said:

"If you will call at once at the hotel, and ask to see Mr. Chickering, you will hear something about your missing diamonds."

But say not a word about the object of your visit to a living soul."

There was no signature.

Thrusting the message into his pocket, he walked on down to the highway, and proceeded rapidly toward the village.

Kate, from the house, saw him receive and read the note. She saw him afterward stride away toward the town.

Her curiosity overcame her prudence. Picking up a hat, she started to leave the house as if to follow.

Just as she stepped upon the veranda, she was confronted by a tall, clerical-looking man who bowed respectfully and before she could pass, drawled:

"Your pardon, miss, but I have something here which I know will very much interest you."

"Stand aside, sir," she flashed. "How dare you trespass thus?"

"Pardon me, miss, but I have a rare book here. It is called 'Daniel Dykeman; or, Who Killed Dorothea Drew?'" he coolly interrupted, extending the volume toward her.

She gave a faint shriek, turned deadly pale, and caught at a pillar for support, to keep from falling.

"It is a wonderfully exciting story," went on the suave bookseller; "and the denouement in the last chapter is most wonderful.

"Some ladies like to read the last chapter of a novel first to find out just how it ends, they are so anxious.

"This chapter in 'Daniel Dykeman' begins at page 214, and if you would choose to read it so as to judge whether you'll like the book, I'll just leave it with you and return later, as the newsboys do on the train."

He laid the book on the veranda at her feet, packed up the other volumes, added, "I'm sure you'll be spell-bound by that last chapter," bowed, and walked rapidly away.

The girl watched him while he was going

down the path as she might have watched a fading spirit. When he disappeared around a bend in the path she snatched the book from the floor, gave it a horrified look, and, holding it clenched in her right hand, fled to her room.

Once locked in and safe from interruption, she dropped into a chair and held the book up before her staring eyes.

She nervously turned to page 214. There was chapter thirty-one, entitled "The Mystery Revealed."

Helplessly, she began to read. As she continued to read, her face, if possible, kept growing more bloodless, her lips seemed to blister in their dryness, she looked like a corpse reading a history of hell.

And this is what she read:

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MYSTERY REVEALED.

"At last the detective succeeded in getting all his testimony together and the crime in all its detail was known to him.

"The murdered woman came to the major's house one night and revealed herself to him as one he had thought long since dead—one who had once been his wife and who was the mother of the young girl whom he called daughter.

"This girl happened into the adjoining room while the major and the adventuress were talking.

"She overheard all; realized that she was not the child of the man she loved as few girls love their father!

"Learned that instead she was the daughter of the adventuress and of the man who had been hanged for murder.

"She heard the woman threaten to claim her child before the world unless the major publicly acknowledged her as his wife and installed her mistress of his home.

"The girl heard her foster-father beg for time to consider which end of the terrible dilemma he should accept; heard her give him

till the second midnight; heard her refuse to reveal the place where she was staying.

"But the girl caught a glimpse of the adventuress' face as the latter was leaving and recognized her as a strange woman who a fortnight before had moved into a furnished farm-house several miles from the village.

"During the sleepless hours of that night she formed a plan to rescue herself and her father from their terrible situation.

"Next night, after all were asleep, she secured some valuable diamonds which her father had recently bought, locked her door, opened the window of her room, and, using the agility as a climber she learned in the gymnasium of her school, this mere child descended to the veranda roof below and thence to the ground.

"Her next work was to use her great strength in lifting a ladder to the veranda roof and placing it under her window.

"Thus was given the impression next day that she had been kidnapped.

"Then she hastened to the farm-house. The house was securely locked up for the night, but a light glimmered from the cracks of the shutters of one window.

"Suddenly a thought entered her head.

"Several weeks before she had climbed an adjoining tree and looked in an attic window.

"The attic window was open. She could enter by means of the tree and the window, and she did.

"In making the ascent a layer from the heel of one of her shoes came off and fell to the ground at the root of the tree.

"A piece of her dress caught on a sharp projection of the limb near the window and was torn off.

"Both the piece of shoe and the fragment of dress afterward fell into the hands of the detective who had noticed the defective shoe and torn dress.

"To drop into the attic was easy, but to get out was impossible.

"The window was so high that with all her agility she could not get back to it.

"To make matters worse, she found the attic door locked.

"Nothing daunted, this girl set to work with a few old tools which she found in the attic to open the door. The rest of that night and all of next day she worked by spells. It was dark on the second night before she succeeded in getting the door open. Softly and slowly she found her way down to the first floor.

"The woman she now so thoroughly hated was in the kitchen just about to sit down to a cup of tea and some toast, which, in the absence of her servants, she had prepared for herself.

"By this time all thought of trying to bribe the woman with her father's diamonds had left the girl's head. A growing desire to murder the woman had taken possession of the child.

"How could she do it?

"Fortune seemed to favor her.

"Just as the woman was ready to pour tea a loud knock came upon the front door.

"She left the tea to admit her late visitor, whom she seemed to be expecting.

"The girl slipped into the kitchen, took a white paper from her pocket, turned its contents into the tea, and, thrusting the crumpled paper back into her pocket, followed the woman into the front part of the house.

"She there, while in hiding, heard the adventuress offer to sell valuable papers to her visitor, a young man of the village whom the girl hated because he was the accepted lover of an elder sister, or one whom she now knew was only her supposed sister.

"She saw the young man go away, promising to return the next night with the money to redeem the secret which the adventuress possessed.

"She saw the woman, after showing the young man out, go to a small book-case, take out a certain book, open it, remove from between the leaves several folded pieces of paper, kiss them and exclaim: 'At last, precious things, you will make me rich.'

"She saw the woman replace the papers, thrust the book back in the case and go to the kitchen and to her tea.

"Presently the woman returned to the room where she had left the book. She was staggering, as if drunk.

"With some difficulty, she reached a chair and sank into it. A great terror took possession of her. She must have realized she was dying.

"At that moment her blood-shot eyes turned toward one of the windows. A face peered in at her from without.

"It was the face of a man she feared with a deadly terror.

"The sight must have hastened the work of the powerful poison she drank with her tea.

"With a gurgling shriek, her head fell upon the back of her chair, and in a moment she was dead.

"Presently the girl slowly and quietly entered the room.

"The man at the window drew back a few feet, but not so far that he could not see all that occurred in the room.

"His proximity was not suspected, however, by the child prisoner.

"This girl first assured herself that the poison she put into the tea had done its work.

"Yes, the adventuress and blackmailer was dead.

"Satisfied of that, the girl's next thought was:

"What were the papers which the woman said would make her rich?"

"She went to the book-case and pulled out the book in which the papers were concealed.

"When she read them Satan suggested a new plan of revenge, and one which might at the same time remove all danger from her path and perhaps give her the undivided fortune as well as love of the man she had so long revered and believed to be her father.

"She would fix the crime on her foster-sister's fiance.

"They would hang him. That would kill her foster-sister.

"Carefully replacing the book with the written papers inside, she took a knife from her pocket.

"The knife had been the property of the rich young man she hated.

"His name was engraved on the handle.

"She opened the large blade, which was nearly three inches long, approached the dead woman, and drove it to the handle into the inanimate breast.

"Then she withdrew the blade, took the knife to the stove, and broke it off close to the handle.

"The blade she thrust back into the wound, after pulling down the gown so as to get at the wound more handily.

"The handle was hidden in the stove, where it would certainly be found.

"But no risk must be run of those papers in the book not being found.

"She dragged the corpse from the chair to the floor in front of a panel-shaped mirror opposite the window at which the horror-fascinated stranger stood watching this strange scene.

"One finger of the corpse's right hand was stained with the blood from the post-mortem wound, and the body placed so as to indicate that the extended hand had reached the mirror in a final effort.

"This done, the girl dripped her own finger, which was smaller than the inanimate

finger of the corpse, into the red fluid and wrote on the mirror:

Book Case

"Daniel Dykeman"

"Page 21"

"Just as she stepped back to inspect her work, she saw reflected in the mirror the face of the man outside.

"The horror on his face was duplicated on her own as she realized that her awful crime had had a witness.

"Before she could recover her presence of mind, the face at the window disappeared, but not till she recognized it as belonging to a stranger whom she had seen hanging around Salem during the previous few days.

"Her position was one which would have driven many a murderer to self-destruction on the spot to escape the vengeance of the law.

"But it had no such effect on this wonderful child.

"Satisfied that the man had fled, she set about preparing proofs to show that he had murdered the woman and abducted her, the girl, at the same time.

"She went out to the kitchen and emptied the tea-pot of its undrank poisoned contents, a piece of evidence which did not escape the keen-eyed detective when he afterward made his search of the premises.

"Then she went up to the garret and replaced the lock on the door. When her work was done, she put her hand in her pocket and pulled out the ball of crumpled paper which had held the deadly poison.

"She threw the wad of paper into a pile of debris, where it was found by the detective.

"The paper still retained some of the poi-

son's peculiar odor when the detective found it and put it to his nose.

"Shortly afterward she got ready to leave the house of her terrible crime. She must go home.

"What should she do with her father's diamonds? They were loose in her pocket. They must be securely hidden where they would most likely never be found.

"She knew the place. The old well, more than one hundred feet deep, on her father's place.

"Soon she left the house, feeling moderately secure.

"No one would believe the peeping, mysterious stranger should he appear against her.

"On the contrary, she had set her trap that he would hang himself should he try it.

"The stranger, however, realized his danger as quickly as the girl saw it, and he fled to New York, only to be tracked down by the detective, to whom he told all he had seen.

"The girl assassin succeeded in reaching her father's old well without being seen. Leaning over the guard rail, she dropped the tell-tale diamonds down.

"Then she went to the house and told a wonderful story of abduction, imprisonment and restoration.

"She described her abductor to correspond with the stranger who had spied upon her crime.

"She even took pains to identify her prison attic by describing the top of a tree which stood outside, which, she said, she could see had one huge dead limb.

"But when the detective later on visited this attic he discovered that the dead limb of the tree could not be seen from any point within the attic, a fact the child had failed to note, and one which helped fasten suspicion upon her.

"When she dropped the diamonds into the

well a button was torn from her dress and fell upon the ground, where the detective found it.

"He had noted its absence from her dress when she came back from her strange adventure. This chance discovery of the button near the well lead to a suspicion that she had dropped the diamonds into the water below.

"Why had he gone to the well in the first place?

"Because his suspicions were aroused about the genuineness of her alleged abduction by the fact that her dog had been locked up in the well-house on the night of her disappearance.

"He knew such an act would not have been done by kidnappers.

"It was the act of the owner of the dog herself.

"He went to the well to examine the dog's prison, when he found the button, which suggested the hiding of the diamonds in the well.

"What became of the young murderess?

"She disappeared, and it is believed she took refuge for life in a convent, where she repented of and atoned for the great sin in after years.

"None of her friends ever saw her again after the day when she was secretly confronted with details of her crime by the kind-hearted detective, who, it is believed, aided in and suggested her self-inflicted convent burial in order to save her loving foster-father from the horrors of the knowledge of her sins.

"And to his dying day the major never knew. He, with the community at large, believed the woman was stabbed to death by the peeking stranger, who the detective took good care should never be found.

"And so, though the major mourned for his lost idol, he lived on and died revering her memory and wholly ignorant of that which would surely have killed him, and at the same time filled his soul with loathing for her had he known the truth.

"FINIS."

Beneath the word "Finis" were pinned two one hundred dollar bills, with the two words attached on a slip of white paper, "Contingent expenses."

The book fell from her hands to the floor.

The girl reader sat for ten minutes, as if life had fled.

Then her white, dry lips moved and words came forth in a harsh whisper.

"He is right; he is just; he is kind; I will go far away, never—to—return, for papa must not know. I will trust the man who has tracked me to the gates of eternity, not to the convent's door. Nick Carter, I have heard, never breaks his word. Then he shall hold my secret safe."

CHAPTER XI.

ODD ENDS PICKED UP.

An hour later Major Keys, accompanied by Nick Carter, returned to Locksley Hall.

The major had his diamonds, but Nick positively refused to tell how they had been recovered. His assistant, he said, had secured them on the promise that the story of their disappearance should be kept secret.

Just as they entered the front hall a maid came flying down stairs.

"Oh, Major Keys," she cried. "Please go up to Miss Kate. I'm afraid she's very sick."

Without waiting to inquire for particulars, Keys hastened up to Kate's room.

Nick was at his side when he entered.

A suspicion of the truth forced itself on his mind.

Nick at a glance saw that she was dying.

"Poor girl! It is probably some of the same fatal drug she gave to Mrs. Smith."

She recognized the major and smiled up into his face. Her lips opened, and the word "Papa" came in a whisper.

Keys leaned forward and kissed her.

As he arose, the dying girl's eyes caught sight of the detective.

She partly raised her hand and gave him a kindly look.

Nick rightly construed her wish and took the hand she had not the power to extend.

As he did so, another smile flitted over her face, and her lips once more moved.

Nick bent over and caught the faint expression of two words:

"Thank you."

They were her last words. With them her breath left her body.

"God forgive the child for the sins which she surely inherited from her father," was Nick's mental prayer, as he laid the lifeless hand on her breast and gently closed the sightless eyes.

* * * * *

Only a few things remain to be told.

When the man with a scar on his face was forced to a confession by Chick, in New York, he furnished Nick with all the missing information to make his own discoveries a connected story.

This story he put into manuscript and sent it, with the novel, "Daniel Dykeman," by Chick to New York.

Chick took book and manuscript to a publisher, who was a great friend of the detective.

The publisher set Nick's story up in type corresponding to the print of the book, making a new chapter thirty-one. This chapter the publisher had bound in the novel in place of the original chapter thirty-one, removed, and Chick brought the book, thus revised, back to Salem.

Nick hoped in this way to inform Kate that her crime was known, and to suggest to her a chance to escape the penalty thereof without revealing the horror of it to her friends and the world.

But the girl preferred death to the convent and her conscience, and she did not hesitate to act when once convinced there was no escape.

Before she took the fatal drug she had carefully destroyed "Daniel Dykeman."

Not a leaf of the book was ever found.

Nick's escape from the well was marvelous.

Chick had arrived from New York on the eleven o'clock train, but found Nick absent from the hotel.

After waiting several hours, he concluded his chief was somewhere about Locksley Hall, and he went up to look for him.

As he approached the well-house, the form of a girl came out and fled toward the house.

Chick concluded something was wrong in the well-house and rushed in.

A large knife lay at his feet. Nick's coat was on the ground near by.

Then he noticed the severed rope.

Leaning over the well, he called to Nick.

The plunge into the cold water had revived the detective. He heard Chick's call, recognized it, and answered.

By using the reel and fishing line, the severed rope was raised and fastened to the windlass. Then Nick climbed up, after which the rope was once more dropped into the well, and the two men left, taking the diamonds with them.

The man with the scar on his face was the abandoned husband of the woman who masqueraded as Ellen Smith. He had traced her to Salem, knowing her plot to blackmail young Hill, and he hoped to rob her of the money after she should get it.

In spying upon the woman, he had been a witness to Kate Key's awful crime. But, realizing his own helplessness and danger, he had fled without giving the alarm.

The murdered woman was not the mother of Benton Hill, who eloped with Kate's criminal father, and she who subsequently married Major Keys. That woman died in the hospital six months after her self-inflicted wound.

While lying thus on her death-bed, she made a full confession of her life story to her nurse, and it was the latter who had represented herself as Ellen Smith, laid her plans to blackmail, and met her death, as narrated.

She had even suffered the pain of a deep burn, self-inflicted, to counterfeit a wound with which to confront Keys.

Luck brought her two victims together at Salem. When she got ready to strike, she had them where she expected to reap a double harvest.

By Talbott's description of the colored servant, who went to New York, and the extent of her round trip ticket, Nick and Patsy intercepted her as she left New York to return to Salem.

This woman furnished Nick with much of the information which revealed the plot of the hospital nurse.

The silk stocking, towel and paper-weight used in sinking the diamonds in the well Nick believes were taken from the old farmhouse.

His theory is that when Kate got ready to return home the diamonds were in her way. She had found no use for them, and now they must be hidden where they would never be found.

She thought of the old well, and, making a bundle of them with whatever came handy, she carried them to the place and dropped them in.

Major Keys never ceased to sincerely mourn for his unfortunate foster-child. But two years later he married Mrs. Hill.

At the same time Benton Hill and Belle Keys became man and wife.

The major and his wife live at Locksley Hall, while Benton Hill took his bride to the house which his mother vacated when she married the major.

None of the four will ever know that the girl who bore the name of Kate Keys died

guilty of the most horrible crime ever known to the State authorities.

[THE END.]

The next number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY will contain "Nick Carter Rescues a Daughter; or, The Junior Partner's Strange Behavior."

LATEST ISSUES.

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- 180—The Government Custom's Swindle; or, Nick Carter's Work for the U. S. Treasury.
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- 169—Unmasked by Nick Carter; or, An Attempt at Blackmail.
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- 147—Nick Carter's Turn at the Wheel; or, Red and Black Both the Same.

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While lying thus on her death-
made a full confession of her life sto-
nurse, and it was the latter who
sented herself as Ellen Smith, la-
to blackmail, and met her death-

She had even suffered
burn, self-infl-
with which

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